Theaster Gates
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THEASTER GATES
IN THE STUDIO WITH LILLY WEI

ARTISTS OFTEN TALK about real estate, but Theaster Gates, 38, multimedia artist, designer and musician, deals in it. An urban planner and developer, community organizer and cultural entrepreneur, Gates is also the inaugural director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago; the new program will include artist residencies and collaborations with area cultural institutions. In 2006, he bought into Chicago’s Grand Crossing neighborhood, on the 6900 block of South Dorchester Avenue, where many buildings are vacant and some boarded up, where one hears gunshots and there is the occasional murder. He eventually acquired the house next door and one down the street, both for a song. Together, the three buildings, all generic multifamily dwellings from the late 19th century, are known as the Dorchester Project. A clear precedent is Houston’s Project Row Houses. The Dorchester Project houses a library and slide archive; with the support of several foundations, Gates recently instituted an artist residency, including public arts programming.

On the day I visited, the neighborhood was peaceful. Gates’s houses handsomely if grimly made over with materials salvaged from other abandoned structures, the two adjoining backyards neatly landscaped. In one house, there is a library, consisting of 14,000 volumes on art and architecture that Gates purchased from the famed nearby Prairie Avenue Bookshop when it closed, and around 60,000 glass lantern slides donated by the University of Chicago art history department. Another houses 8,000 LP’s bought from Dr. Wax, a storied local record store, now also shuttered.

Gates’s sculptural practice is also based on remnants—humble materials “potent” (a word he favors) with associations. He saves furnishings and pieces of derelict buildings, formerly inhabited by black people, for reuse in his sculptures. His aesthetic is minimalist but infused with a strong sense of narrative; his thonelike, custom-upholstered shoeshine stands, stacks of plates embedded in concrete blocks, and framed, rolled-up fire hoses all speak to aspects of black history and black daily life.

In 2007, unable to find a gallery to show his work, he held his own event, a highly orchestrated dinner party-cum-performance, Plate Convergence, and, he says, “people came, they all came”—locals, artists and other art world figures. It was his breakthrough, making him an area celebrity and heralding a rise that was national and then international. In 2009, curator Francesco Bonami visited the Dorchester Project, and Gates found himself in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. Exhibitions followed at the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston.

Gates has shows currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Seattle Art Museum. In 2012, he will be included in a group show at Chicago’s Smart Museum, “Feast: An Exhibition of Radical Hospitality,” for which he will arrange a series of dinner parties to explore the roles of hospitality and food in cultural exchange and social transformation, themes that figure prominently in Gates’s projects and echo those addressed by artists from Joseph Beuys to Gordon Matta-Clark and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Gates has also been chosen as the commissioned artist for the 2012 Armory Show in New York; his work will be used to create the fair’s visual identity.

Born in 1973, Gates grew up in East Garfield Park, on Chicago’s West Side, as the youngest of nine children. He studied urban planning and ceramics at Iowa State University, and, at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa, earned an MA in fine arts and religious studies. In 2006, he returned to Iowa State and got an MS in urban planning, religious studies and ceramics. He has lived in Chicago since then. I talked with Gates this summer at his enormous studio on Fulton Street, in an area that is a mix of factories and artists’ studios. In conversation, he is a natural, charismatic raconteur (he considered becoming a preacher) with a firm grip on vernacular and spiritual languages as well as the theoretical and academic. The space was stuffed with materials stripped from 6901 South Dorchester that will be used in a future project.

LILLY WEI There’s been a great change in your career recently, hasn’t there? You said that as recently as four years ago, no one would show your work.

THEASTER GATES The process of emerging really is a process. I love ceramics and traditional sculptural materials. I really like working with people, and I enjoy place-based interventions. But the language for that was pretty new to me. Four

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Theaster Gates outside his studio in Chicago, 2011. Photo © Peter Hoffman.
years ago, I was still trying to figure out what my art was and how to be a good citizen in a place like Chicago. It became clear that if I wanted to have a practice that is both object-based and engagement-based, I had to figure out ways to present it on my own. It wasn’t until a project that I did with the Hyde Park Art Center in 2007, Plate Convergence, that everything began to come together.

**WEI** This involved the Yamaguchi story, right?

**GATES** Yes. I created a story centered on a fictive pottery commune in Mississippi founded in the 1960s by an also-fictive Japanese ceramicist, Yamaguchi, who had fled Hiroshima, married a black civil rights activist, and instituted a ritual called Plate Convergences, or conversations where people came from all over to discuss issues of race, political difference and inequity. Yamaguchi is supposed to have made ceramic plates specifically for the “black food” served at the dinners, and this dinnerware went into the Yamaguchi Institute Collection as part of the story. It was shown with a video at the Hyde Park Art Center as an example of his object-engagement projects. I claimed him as a mentor. As the story went, he and his wife died in a car accident in 1991 and their son founded the Yamaguchi Institute to continue their vision of social transformation. I made ceramic plates, videotaped highly curated dinners and found a space for an exhibition of the ceramics and video. We gave a huge Japanese soul-food dinner, made by a Japanese chef and my sister, in honor of the Yamaguchis and their dinners. A young mixed-race artist enacted the role of their son and thanked everyone for coming. The whole thing duped a lot of people.

**WEI** And this helped you to realize you might not need institutions to present your work?

**GATES** I realized that if I had the courage to make work outside the institution, then institutions might actually be interested in the work. I was ready to be an outsider and have an outsider practice.

**WEI** Courage works, evidently. How did you end up in Francesco Bonami’s Whitney Biennial in 2010?

**GATES** I met Francesco in 2009 and we started talking about the Biennial. He came to Chicago and saw Dorchester and was really interested in my ability to think about multiple properties and about space in a big way. He was sizing me up for the Whitney’s sculpture court, which is a hard space to deliver in, but not unlike the Dorchester Project. The Whitney was my first breakthrough to a larger public and I was greatly honored, but the real breakthrough was what happened at the Hyde Park Art Center three years prior. Had it not been for that, there would have been nothing to show Francesco. And at Art Basel Miami Beach in December, just before the Whitney Biennial, Kavi Gupta, my Chicago dealer, showed the first shoe-shine stands. They created a modest buzz and it gave me real pleasure to imagine that objects that had deep meaning for me might potentially strike a complementary chord in others, although our experiences are very different.

**WEI** Tell me about the Dorchester Project.

**GATES** You tell me about Dorchester.

**WEI** I was impressed by it when I saw it in March. It seemed a wonderful community hub with books, music, film, art, residencies, a garden, dinners and performances for your...
This page, photos of the Dorchester Project. All images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago/Berlin.

Clockwise from top left: Front of 6916 South Dorchester Ave. Backyard of the Dorchester houses. Photo Lilly Wei.
neighbors, friends and visitors. I also loved the way it looked and was made, constructed from salvaged materials. It was not simply optimis-
tic but also pragmatic, economical, a good investment in the future and an expansive way to define art. It seems to exemplify one aspect of your notion of stewardship.

**GATES** It's the kind of utopian enterprise you really get wrapped up in. I like to let things emerge. Dorchester—the architecture, the programs, the people—is something that emerges from a belief that beautiful things can happen anywhere. I'm not talking about a formalized, historicized sense of beauty. I'm talking about planting flowers in dirt, which is often better than just dirt. And framed dirt is often better than unframed dirt.

**WEI** You refer to frames a lot.

**GATES** I do. I think people miss things when they're unframed, when no context is given. The frame says that something is so important that a gaudy frame has been put around it. There are all kinds of frames—writing is a frame, financing is a frame, endorsement is a frame.

**WEI** Is Dorchester a frame for your art practice?

**GATES** Absolutely—and a resource and a value. At the Armory Show last year, in a conversation with Naomi Beckwith [curator at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art] and Franklin Sirmans [curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art], I described it as a kind of circular ecological system. Here is an abandoned and fire-damaged building. We gut it and try to capture as much of it as we can and put those materials to their highest possible use, to make them more special than they were. They go into a gallery, a museum, and because somebody sees them in that context, they become even more special, and because of that, I get a check, the gallery gets a check and that check helps me finance something on the block.

To me that process feels like one work of art over two years, over 10 years. Then I'm invited to a collector's home and I love seeing a piece I made that comes out of a building that I rehabbed five years ago.

**WEI** Would you ever leave Dorchester?

**GATES** I don't know. I didn't grow up on South Dorchester. I grew up on the West Side, so my presence on Dorchester is somewhat arbitrary, but it was the place I could afford. I wouldn't feel guilty if I left Dorchester one day. One of the things I'm learning is that I still feel placeless, that the act of place-making feels like a kind of sacrifice, because I'm the catalyst for action in places in St. Louis, Omaha and Chicago that I'm developing with my Rebuild Foundation, which means I'm always going somewhere else.

**WEI** Would you say you have an active sense of history?

**GATES** Yes, but how do we live with history? What do we remember? What falls away? We vaguely remember that there were race riots, that important speeches were made in the teens, '20s and '30s, '50s and '60s, but the nuances go away. What we're left with is a shell of a once-potent moment. That was what my show "An Epitaph for Civil Rights and Other Domesticated Structures," this year at Kavi Gupta, was trying to get at. It disturbs me that we don't fully remember the challenges to civil rights suffered in this country. We should still be engaged in the protest, in the question of rights. Certain materials make you grapple with those histories and you can use those materials to make modest gestures that are really monumental. I'm learning civil rights.

**WEI** Tell me about the fire hoses that made such an impact in "An Epitaph for Civil Rights." They came from decommissioned firehouses, and refer to the hosing of demonstrators in Birmingham in 1963. They are estheticized but nonetheless remain loaded.

**GATES** I started making them less than a year ago, but they've become part of my canon already. I'd been thinking what I could do to jar people's memory about this history without making it kitsch or a cheap shot. And I remembered all those interesting moments when you start...
to think you’re doing all right, when somebody will remind you that you’re still a nigger. I’m not immune to the problems that black people faced in the ‘20s, ‘30s, ‘50s. In a place like Chicago and other big cities, some people have benefited from the civil rights movement, but many others haven’t, and I feel that I’m on both sides of that. I’m interested in reconstructing histories and intervening in futures.

WEI And the materials you use?

GATES There is a formality in the presentation of materials that aligns you with the canon, with the regime of the history of art. Some things are excluded, others included. I’m really curious about how materials, things and places become valuable—and to whom. Monetary value is the goal for some. But I’m curious about all these multiple registers of value, because value is negotiated. Dealers, collectors, galleries and museums all work hard to determine systems of value and then to protect the valued objects and the market mechanism they’ve established.

WEI Since you are so busy, do you have a large staff?

GATES No, three people usually help me. We make things together.

WEI Together?

GATES Well, I make them. There are things that other folks can’t do for you. But it’s a conversation between me and the people I work with. This “genius artist, don’t touch my shit”—I’m not from that. There’s value in being engaged with people and in the improvisational. When you build a roof, you need a couple of guys on the roof mopping and somebody receiving the bucket and somebody pouring tar out and a spotter and somebody running for materials. That’s my tradition. You could also say that I may be a little more sensitive to exclusivity and would sometimes want to interrupt that.

WEI How do you see the difference between projects like Dorchester and the making of art objects?

GATES I’m one person, one whole person who thinks about friendship and neighborliness and God as much as I think about object-making. I bring that whole person and all my resources to all of my projects. They just look different and have different ways of being generative.

WEI You said you built the houses for the neighborhood . . .

GATES Let’s say I built them for myself and the neighborhood benefits.

WEI And if you leave, what’s left?

GATES This part of my practice is about the politics of staying. I believe in the place, and I’m invested in it. But it’s fine for my neighborhood to change around me. It would even be fine if in five years, maybe because of me, the whole thing is lily-white.

WEI I’m surprised that you condone a gentrification that pushes the neighborhood people out—the few that remain—which is what always happens.

GATES Gentrification won’t need my approval or disapproval. But 6901 and 6916 South Dorchester were available because of policies that moved people out and moved other people in. So I could find myself three years from now with a whole bunch of new neighbors. What would being on Dorchester mean then? There will be nothing left for me to do here if everyone is lily-white and everyone’s garden is as pretty as mine. Or better.

WEI Would you sell it then?

GATES That’s what people do. Or you develop another plan. If it is the politics of staying, then you invite black people back. You force what’s new to deal with what’s old. There are lots of devices. It’s all tricksterism.

WEI Shall we talk about some of your current projects? “The Listening Room,” for instance, your show at the Seattle Art Museum that’s opening this December.

GATES “The Listening Room” is about a couple of things, such as the role of music in cultural dissemination and political protest, and how the cataloguing, archiving and sharing of soul music contribute to cultural memory, to the creation of new voices. There will be a handcrafted deejay booth and a deejay in the museum, spinning selections from Dr. Wax’s Record Archive, along with seating for listeners. There will also be signs, like Dr. Wax’s original sandwich board sidewalk sign. Many of the records in the collection are incredibly valuable in terms of American history, and jazz, blues and R&B culture. There are records that you cannot find on shelves. It’s also about the re-invention of the museum as a space for multiple forms of contemplation. I want to continue to suggest that culture is never irrelevant, but not everyone can access it. I want to create opportunities where more of the things that are important to me, like making music, dancing, talking shit and remembering are things that more of the world has access to.

WEI You are very aware of houses and neighborhoods. Were you always so conscious of them?

GATES I lived between two worlds as a child. I was bused, and I saw that people did other things in the summer than go to Mississippi to see family, as I was doing. Like, they were going to Paris—I really wanted to go to Paris—and the more I saw that there were other things to do in the summer, the more I wanted to do them.

WEI So this consciousness led to other opportunities?

GATES The things that I didn’t think were possible still weren’t at that time, but I began to want them. And later, I traveled. I studied in South Africa, in Japan—and I’ve been to Paris. But that period of conditioning between what you hope for and what you have, that feels like where muscle comes from for me. From the chasm between what I wanted and needed and what I had came a right to be, a right to pursue, a right to imagine. And that was the path to possibility.

“THIS ‘GENIUS ARTIST, DON’T TOUCH MY SHIT’—I’M NOT FROM THAT. THERE’S VALUE IN BEING ENGAGED WITH PEOPLE AND IN THE IMPROVISATIONAL.”

LILLY WEI is a New York-based writer and independent curator.
Listening Stool and Stack, 2011, floorboards, three elements shown, each 31¼ by 14 by 14 inches. Photo Young Sun Han.